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# Toward a critical pedagogy of popular culture: Literacy development among urban youth

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Finding effective ways to teach today's student population is perhaps the greatest challenge facing literacy educators in the United States. As classrooms become increasingly diverse, educators struggle to find curricula and pedagogical strategies that are inclusive and affirmative yet facilitate the development of academic and critical literacies. Unfortunately, much of the multicultural education literature—with its limited conception of culture as a racial or ethnic identity—offers little to help teachers attempting to make connections and create learning communities in multiethnic urban classrooms (McCarthy, 1998). New approaches, such as the critical teaching of popular culture, can help students acquire and develop the literacies needed to navigate “new-century” schools. Popular culture can help students deconstruct dominant narratives and contend with oppressive practices in hopes of achieving a more egalitarian and inclusive society.

## **New Literacy studies and popular culture**

New Literacy theorists argue that social context and cultural diversity significantly affect the liter-

acy process. Often, the failure of urban students to develop “academic” literacy skills stems not from a lack of intelligence but from the inaccessibility of the school curriculum to students who are not in the “dominant” or “mainstream” culture. These theorists believe that such students are literate but that their literacies have little connection with the dominant literacies promoted in public schools (New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995). Educators of new-century schools, these theorists argue, need to examine nonschool literacy practices to find connections between local literacies and the dominant, academic literacies. Mahiri (1998), for example, found strong connections between urban youth's literacy practices with popular culture and the types of literacies required in schools. Mahiri's work suggested that the critical teaching of popular culture is one way to make connections that are relevant to all students in diverse urban classrooms.

Academic literacy, for the purposes of this column, refers to those forms of engaging with, producing, and talking about texts that have currency in primary, secondary, and postsecondary education (Harris & Hodges, 1995; Street, 1995; Venezky, Wagner, & Ciliberti, 1990). Critical

literacy, on the other hand, is defined as the ability not only to read and write, but also to assess texts in order to understand the relationships between power and domination that underlie and inform those texts (Hull, 1993). The critically literate can understand the socially constructed meaning embedded in texts as well as the political and economic contexts in which texts are embedded. Ultimately, critical literacy can lead to an emancipated worldview and even transformational social action (Freire, 1970; Hull, 1993; McLaren, 1989; UNESCO, 1975).

As I situate literacy learning in the critical study of popular culture, it is important to define the terms *culture* and *popular culture*. Williams (1995) suggested that culture is one of the most complex terms in the English language. Critiquing sociologists, anthropologists, and "cultural" critics who examine only single components of culture, Williams (1998, p. 48) articulated the following three components of culture that are essential to any thorough analysis of the subject.

1. The *ideal* component of culture is a state or process of human perfection in terms of absolute or universal values.

2. The *documentary* component of culture is the body of intellectual and imaginative work in which human thought and experience are recorded.

3. The *social* component of culture is a description of a particular way of life that expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and ordinary behavior.

Each of Williams's components are represented in this analysis of the critical pedagogy of popular culture. In the *ideal* sense, I analyze popular culture as it relates to the expression of universal human values, namely the desire and struggle for freedom from tyranny and oppression. I also *document* and analyze elements of the body of intellectual and imaginative work that popular culture comprises, such as hip-hop

music, film, and texts produced by mainstream media. Finally, I examine popular culture as the everyday *social* experience of marginalized students as they confront, make sense of, and contend with social institutions such as schools, the mass media, corporations, and governments.

My definition of popular culture was inspired by cultural and critical theorists (e.g., Adorno & Horkheimer, 1999; Docker, 1994; Hall, 1998; McCarthy, 1998; Storey, 1998; Williams, 1995, 1998). These theorists saw popular culture as a site of struggle between the subordinate and the dominant groups in society. Popular culture, they argued, is not an imposed mass culture or a people's culture, it is more a terrain of exchange between the two. The texts and practices of popular culture move within what Gramsci (1971) called a compromise equilibrium. Those who look at popular culture from this perspective see it as a terrain of ideological struggle expressed through music, film, mass media artifacts, language, customs, and values. For the critical educator, then, popular culture provides a logical connection between lived experiences and the school culture for urban youth.

The arguments for incorporating popular culture into traditional curricula are quite compelling and have generated much excitement, along with much confusion and anxiety, among urban educators. In my experiences as a teacher and teacher educator, I have met countless colleagues who verbally support incorporating popular culture, yet feel unprepared and daunted by the project. Much of the reticence and confusion surrounding the inclusion of popular culture stems from a lack of understanding. Given its roots and ethos, any investigation of popular culture must emanate from and serve the interests of members of marginalized groups. That is, any pedagogy of popular culture has to be a critical pedagogy where students and teachers learn from and with one another while engaging in authentic dialogue that is centered on the experiences of urban youth as participants in and creators of

popular culture (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1997; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 1989).

## **The practice**

I want to illustrate how the critical teaching of popular culture can produce powerful academic and social results with urban youth. I draw from data collected during the eight years that I taught urban teens in the San Francisco Bay area and southern California, USA. I focus on a few particular manifestations of popular culture (i.e., hip-hop, film, and mass media) around which I prepared classroom units. I include classroom unit descriptions and vignettes where appropriate.

### ***Teaching hip-hop culture***

It can be argued that hip-hop music is the representative voice of urban youth because the genre was created by and for urban youth (George, 1998; Rose, 1994). In addition to acting as voices in the urban community, many rappers consider themselves educators and see at least a portion of their mission as raising the consciousness of their communities. The raising of critical consciousness in people who have been oppressed is the first step in helping them to obtain critical literacy (Freire, 1970). The influence of rap as a voice of resistance for urban youth proliferates through artists who endeavor to bring an accurate yet critical depiction of the urban situation to a hip-hop generation.

Given the social, cultural, and academic relevance of hip-hop music, a colleague and I designed a classroom unit that incorporated hip-hop music and culture into a traditional high school senior English poetry unit. We began the unit with an overview of poetry in general, attempting to redefine poetry and the poet's role. We emphasized the importance of understanding the historical period in which a poem was written in order to come to a deep interpretation. In the introductory lecture, we laid out all of the historical and literary periods that would be covered in the unit (e.g., the Elizabethan age, the Puritan

Revolution in England, the Civil War, and the Post-Industrial Revolution in the United States). We placed hip-hop music and the Post-Industrial Revolution right alongside other historical and literary periods so that students could use a period and genre of poetry they were familiar with as a lens to examine the other literary works. We also wanted to encourage our students to re-evaluate how they view elements of their popular culture.

The second major portion of the unit was the group presentation of a poem and a rap song. The groups were asked to prepare a justifiable interpretation of their poem and song with relation to their specific historical and literary periods and to analyze the links between the two. After a week of preparation, each group was given a class period to present its work and have its arguments critiqued by peers. In addition to the group presentations, students were asked to complete an anthology of 10 poems, 5 of which would be presented at a poetry reading. Finally, students were asked to write a five- to seven-page critical essay on a song of their choice.

The students generated quality interpretations and made interesting connections between the canonical poems and the rap songs. They were also inspired to create their own critical poems to serve as celebration and social commentary. Their critical investigations of popular texts brought about oral and written critiques similar to those required by college preparatory English classrooms. The students moved beyond critical reading of literary texts to become cultural producers themselves, creating and presenting poems that provided critical social commentary and encouraged action for social justice. The unit adhered to critical pedagogy because it was situated in the experiences of the students, called for critical dialogue and a critical engagement of the text, and related the texts to larger social and political issues.

### ***Teaching popular film***

The National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association Standards for

the English Language Arts (1996) mentions popular film and television as visual texts worthy of study in K-12 classrooms in this landmark statement:

Being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users not only of print and spoken language but also of the visual language of film and television.... Teaching students how to interpret and create visual texts...is another essential component of the English language arts curriculum. Visual communication is part of the fabric of contemporary life. (p. 5)

The notion of films as visual texts worthy of academic study has been growing within the postsecondary academy for some time. The critical film studies field has grown in prominence, and there are now academics who use critical theory to study film at nearly every major university in the U.S. These recent developments point to the legitimacy of popular films as academic texts worthy of critical interrogation by urban educators and their students.

In my classrooms, I created units in which students were able to use their visual literacies and experiences with popular film to learn, interpret, and deconstruct literary texts. This analysis focuses on two classroom units that incorporated popular film with the traditional curriculum to make meaningful connections with canonical texts and to promote the development of academic and critical literacies. The first unit began with *The Godfather* trilogy (Coppola, 1972, 1974, 1993) and incorporated Homer's *The Odyssey*. Another unit joined Richard Wright's (1989) *Native Son* with the film *A Time to Kill* (Schumaker, 1996).

During the units, the students watched the films in class while reading the accompanying texts at home. They would take notes on the film, and we would discuss each segment of the movie in class. On a typical day, there might be 30 minutes of film watching and 25 minutes of critical discussion. During the films, the corresponding books were introduced, and students discussed

similarities and differences between characters in the film and the books and people in their own lives. For instance, while watching *The Godfather* and reading *The Odyssey*, students discussed the portrayal of heroes in Western epics and Western society. They compared Homer's Odysseus to Coppola's Michael Corleone. They also looked to their own society for examples of heroes. While watching *A Time to Kill*, the students discussed justice in the context of the lives of Wright's Bigger Thomas and Schumaker's Carl Lee Hailey, and they examined their own school for examples of injustice. Ultimately, one class decided to devote the last six weeks of school to creating a magazine that depicted the injustices they experienced as students at an underresourced urban school.

By combining popular film with canonical texts, the students were able to hone their critical and analytical skills and use them in interpretations. They were also able to understand the connection between literature, popular culture, and their everyday lives. Further, they were able to translate their analyses into quality oral debates and expository pieces. The *A Time to Kill* and *Native Son* unit traditionally concluded with a mock trial, while *The Odyssey* and *The Godfather* unit ended with a formal debate. As with the hip-hop unit, classroom activities laid the groundwork for more traditional academic work while fostering student activism.

### **Teaching television and media**

While working with urban youth in Los Angeles, I helped coordinate a series of research seminars that brought high school students to the local university for several weeks during the summer. These teens were apprenticed as critical researchers to study the access urban youth had to public spaces and social institutions. During one such seminar, we found ourselves studying these issues while the Democratic National Convention was taking place in the city. One student research team decided to study access to corporate media and the corporate media's portrayal of urban

youth. The students read literature relating to critical media literacy and the sociology of education, designed a study, conducted interviews, analyzed countless hours of news coverage, and performed a content analysis of major U.S. daily newspapers.

As I followed these teens through their research process, I noticed that they were able to meaningfully draw upon personal experiences during the reading of texts concerning critical media literacy or during interviews they conducted with members of the mainstream media (Kellner, 1995). Motivated and empowered by the prospect of addressing a real problem in their community, the students learned the tools of research, read difficult texts, and produced their own text of high academic merit.

## The politics and possibilities

Much of the excitement about popular culture in the United States is tempered by the recent focus, at the state and national levels, on standardized tests as the sole evaluators of academic merit and skill. I believe that critical-literacy educators should envision teaching popular culture as compatible with the current educational climate and, at the same time, as culturally and socially relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Critical-literacy educators in urban schools should not avoid standards debates or apologize to colleagues and parents about innovative curricula and pedagogies that can teach the skills students need to be successful in school. Educators need to conduct classroom-based research on innovative practices and participate in policy debates at every level of schooling. They also need to participate in conversations about alternative forms of assessment that are more compatible with recent developments in literacy studies and inclusive of students' nonschool literacy practices—such as those associated with participation in popular culture. Critical teachers and teacher educators can use classroom-based research to prove that there are ways to meet the challenges the new century of-

fers and turn them into opportunities to connect to the worlds of students, to promote academic achievement, and to prepare students for critical citizenship in a multicultural democracy.

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